

IN SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

AUGUST 11, 1848.

Submitted, considered by unanimous consent and agreed to, and ordered to be printed.

Mr. DAVIS, of Massachusetts, made the following

REPORT:

*The Committee on Commerce, having had under their consideration various memorials and documents referred to them, concerning the loss of life and property in the use of steamers, submit the following report:*

The object of the petitioners is to protect life and property by suitable legislation, if such can be devised.

This subject came under the deliberations of Congress in when a law was passed containing many provisions which were then believed to be salutary, as they would have a tendency to restrain the employment of weak or defective machinery, and to curb down the culpable rashness of navigators.

While this law has not entirely failed, yet it evidently has not answered expectation, as explosions have and do occur with very disastrous consequences. Life is sacrificed and property destroyed.

But the calamities which alarm the public do not arise from explosions alone, but from fire, collisions, and from wrecks from every cause, when the steamer has an inadequate supply of boats to rescue the passengers and crew.

In regard to explosions, it is desirable to make some provision, if it be possible, which shall diminish, if not entirely suppress, disasters from this cause. The same may be said of fires: every suitable precaution should be taken to avoid their occurrence, but in case they do happen, efficient means of extinguishment should be provided. And further, both in regard to fires and wrecks from other cause, the most ample provision of boats should be made to ensure the escape of all persons on board.

Explosions of boilers, the committee are satisfied, have often occurred by reason of the weakness, imperfection and unsuitableness of the machinery, and probably more frequently from carelessness and unskilfulness, or rashness in the management.

If a law could, therefore, secure the employment of none but sound, strong machinery, and none but prudent, skillful engineers, the object so much desired would be attained.

If the wood work of a vessel is sufficiently protected in the con-

struction, and proper means employed to prevent the ignitions of the wood by the heat from the boilers and flues, there can be but little danger of combustion from the furnaces.

But, as fire may occur from unknown defects in these particulars, or from other causes, suitable arrangements should be required for its prompt extinguishment, come from what source it may.

An adequate supply of boats is necessary to rescue both passengers and crew in case of fire, collision or disaster, from any cause which requires an abandonment of the vessel, and as the owners do not make proper provision they should be compelled to do it.

In regard to collisions, the plan hitherto pursued is to give warning by signal lights and bells. These experience has proved to be inadequate. Collisions still happen, partly from carelessness, but oftener, probably, from the unskilfulness or culpable rashness of officers and pilots.

The system of pilotage doubtless admits of improvement, and there is reason to believe that useful regulations may be introduced by which steamers, ascending and descending rivers, shall be governed, and if observed, collisions avoided.

The most serious difficulty which the committee have encountered is in determining, amid the diversity of opinion which prevails, the cause of explosions. They will not here express any decided opinion, on this point, but be the cause whatever it may, the evidence tends strongly to prove that an adequate and certain supply of water in the boilers at all times, will prevent most of the explosions. But as there is some uncertainty as to the best mode of providing for this neglect, as well as for some of the others, the committee deem it most advisable to postpone the further consideration of the subject until the next session of Congress.

This course they have felt the more inclined to take, as the commissioner of patents, having been directed by the Senate to collect information on this subject, has not as yet reported.

Under these circumstances the committee recommend the adoption of the following resolution:

*Resolved*, That the Secretary of the Treasury be directed to collect and report to the Senate, at the commencement of its next session, any facts or information which he may deem useful in regard to the explosion of steam boilers and the collision of steam vessels.